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Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2015 - Latvia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Latvia is a multiparty parliamentary democracy. A unicameral parliament (Saeima) exercises legislative authority. Observers considered elections in October 2014 for the 100-seat Saeima to be free and fair. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most significant human rights problem during the year was corruption.

Additional human rights problems included police abuse of persons in their custody, poor conditions in detention and prison facilities, delays in court proceedings, and incomplete restitution of Jewish communal property. Noncitizens, who constituted approximately 12 percent of the population, naturalized at a slow rate and could not participate in elections. There were reports of violence against women; anti-Semitic incidents; trafficking in persons; and societal discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons.

The government took steps to prosecute officials who committed abuses in most instances, although significant concerns remained regarding accountability for corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the constitution and the law prohibit such practices, there were reports that government officials employed them. The Office of the Ombudsman continued to receive complaints about police behavior, and reports continued of police abuse of persons in their custody.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions generally did not meet international standards.

Physical Conditions: A government task force conducting a multi-year audit of the prison system identified as problems inadequate healthcare services, poor infrastructure, and insufficient living space. Some prisoners were living in spaces of 27 square feet or less. As of 2014, 70 percent of inmates lived in cells or dormitory-type apartments of 43 square feet per inmate.

A September Ministry of Justice report on health care in prisons and detention facilities highlighted a critical shortage of health-care staff and described the negative impact of staffing shortages and low wages on morale. Prison officials reported 25 vacant positions for doctors and warned that many personnel were nearing retirement age.

According to the country's Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the incidence of infectious diseases in prisons has not decreased since 2010. Approximately 41 percent of inmates were infected with such diseases as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

In the first 10 months of the year, there were two suicides (by hanging) in prisons. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) asserted that suicides and other deaths in prisons were directly related to psychological violence by prison staff or other inmates.

Both the ombudsman and the Justice Ministry received complaints from prisoners during the year, including about general living conditions, access to health care, and human rights abuses. The Justice Ministry found most complaints to be unfounded.

Administration: Prison authorities generally investigated credible allegations of inhuman conditions and documented the results of their investigations in a publicly accessible manner. During his prison visits, the ombudsman also collected information on complaints. The Ministry of Justice and other government bodies monitored prison and detention center conditions.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by independent nongovernmental observers.

Improvements: During the year the Prison Administration, which is under the Ministry of Justice, made a sustained effort to improve prison conditions, most notably by renovating facilities to increase living space. An amendment to the law enacted on June 18 raised the norm for living space per prisoner from 26.9 square feet to 43 square feet in multi-occupancy cells and 97 square feet in single-occupancy cells. As a result of the continuing task-force audit, the Ministry of Justice closed

one of the prisons in Riga and reduced the overall number of inmates in prisons through alternative sentencing, the release of more inmates with exemplary behavior, and other measures.

The Prison Administration also addressed problems of the country's foreign inmates, who numbered approximately 150 in November. It created brochures for guards explaining how to treat foreign inmates as well as brochures and an accompanying online tool to help foreign inmates understand basic terms in Latvian.

In the first 11 months of the year, authorities released 32 prisoners under a new electronic monitoring program for low-risk prisoners.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed this prohibition.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The State Police, Security Police, and State Border Guards are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior. Municipal police are under local government control. The armed forces, Military Counterintelligence Service, Protective Service, and National Guard are subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. State police and municipal police forces share responsibility for maintaining public order.

State Police are generally responsible for conducting criminal investigations, but Security Police, financial police, military police, prison authorities, the Bureau for Preventing and Combating Corruption, and other state institutions may also have jurisdiction. The Security Police are responsible for combating terrorism and other internal security threats. The armed forces and the National Guard are primarily responsible for external security.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces, and the government had effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the security forces.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

In most cases officials require a warrant issued by an authorized judicial official to make an arrest. Exceptions, specifically defined by law, include persons caught committing a crime by officers or identified by eyewitnesses or persons who pose a flight risk. The law gives prosecutors 48 hours either to release arrestees or charge and bring them before a judge. Authorities generally respected these requirements. Officials generally informed detainees promptly of charges against them. While a bail system exists, officials used it infrequently and did so most often in cases involving economic crimes.

Detainees have the right to an attorney who may be present during questioning. Detainees were usually informed of that right. The government generally provided attorneys for indigent defendants.

Authorities permitted detainees prompt access to family members. There were no reports that authorities detained suspects incommunicado or held them under house arrest.

Pretrial Detention: For the most serious crimes, the law limits pretrial detention to 15 months from the first filing of a case. The maximum allowable detention including the trial is 21 months. According to Justice Ministry data, the average length of time between the first filing and the first court procedure was nearly 10 weeks for a criminal case and nearly two months for an appeal. NGOs continued to express concern about the length of pretrial detention, hearing postponements, and prosecutorial actions that tended to prolong trials. During the first 10 months of the year, the ombudsman received 35 complaints about legal maneuvers by prosecutors that resulted in lengthened trials.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence. There were problems, including inefficiency. The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair, public, trial, and most judges enforced this right. Verdicts and court documents were available online. In some individual cases, the fairness of judges' verdicts remained a concern. In July a Liepaja court sentenced two men (a father and son) to community service for the long-term sexual abuse of a minor. The public, parliamentarians, the Ministry of Justice, and NGOs criticized the judge for issuing too lenient a sentence for a crime whose maximum penalty is five years' imprisonment (see section 6). During the first 10 months of the year, the ombudsman received 38 complaints about lengthy proceedings, excessive pretrial detention, and detention without timely charges.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants have the right to a presumption of innocence, to be informed promptly of the charges against them, to an expeditious, and in most cases, open trial, although officials may close trials to protect government secrets or the interests of minors. Defendants also have the right to consult with an attorney in a timely manner and, if they are indigent, at government expense. The law provides for the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense. Defendants have the right to access government-held evidence, confront witnesses against them, present witnesses and evidence in their defense, refuse to testify or confess guilt, and appeal. Authorities generally respected these rights, which extended to all defendants.

There is no jury system; a single trial judge hears most cases. Judicial proceedings take place in Latvian. Defendants who are not fluent in Latvian have the right to become acquainted with documentation concerning their case and to participate in court proceedings using their native language with the assistance of an interpreter.

Both the ombudsman and NGOs expressed concern that long judicial delays often prevented access to the justice system. The problem was especially acute in administrative courts, where up to two years could pass before an initial hearing on even minor matters. The Ministry of Justice took

measures to reduce backlogs in civil and criminal courts, including hiring additional judges. The length of city and district court trials continued to decline. The average civil case took eight months in city courts and three months in district courts. The average criminal case required five months in city courts and three months in district courts.

NGOs reported that judicial transparency improved following installation of audio and video recording equipment in most courtrooms in 2014. The recordings were generally available to the public.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters. It is possible to bring a lawsuit seeking damages or seeking remedies for a human rights violation. Individuals may appeal cases involving alleged state violations of the European Convention of Human Rights to the European Court of Human Rights. The government generally upheld the law concerning civil procedures and generally enforced civil court orders.

Property Restitution

Restitution of World War II-era Jewish communal property remained incomplete. These properties included cemeteries, former synagogues, schools, hospitals, and community centers.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and the law prohibit such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of speech, including for members of the press, but there were legal restrictions involving racial and ethnic incitement, denial or glorification of crimes against humanity, and certain war crimes. Authorities generally respected the law.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: Although the laws generally provide for freedom of speech, incitement to racial or ethnic hatred and spreading of false information about the financial system are crimes. The law forbids glorifying or denying genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the country perpetrated by the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany. Violation of these provisions can lead to a sentence of five years in prison, community service, or a fine.

Press and Media Freedoms: The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with few restrictions. The law requires that 65 percent of all television broadcast airtime in national and regional electronic media be in Latvian or dubbed or subtitled in Latvian. Extensive Russian-language programming was also available.

In July the parliament dismissed the head of the country's regulatory body for the media, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP), after a state audit report cited misconduct. The Latvian Journalists Association criticized the decision as politically motivated and accused parliamentarians of attempting to limit press freedom. The country's president also opposed the decision, asserting that it endangered democratic values. Following a December 23 ruling by the Administrative District Court, the head of the Council was reinstated, reversing parliament's decision.

Violence and Harassment: In January police briefly detained a camera operator filming a protest at the Russian embassy against alleged Russian aggression in Ukraine. After a disciplinary investigation, police reprimanded two police officers for acting without due cause.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: In June the parliament amended the education law to require that schools adhere to "moral standards in education." While the approach authorities would take to enforcement remained unclear, critics asserted that the law promoted censorship and intolerance. In October Riga Mayor Nils Usakovs ordered Riga schools to scour school textbooks for swear words to ensure that the city's teaching materials complied with Education Ministry regulations. In September a teacher in Riga received a reprimand from the school administration for analyzing poetry that contained swear words. The director of a Riga school banned the showing of the 1995 film *Total Eclipse* due to its alleged promotion of immoral behavior involving sexual orientation.

In August the NEPLP fined the broadcaster Radio 5, 1,500 euros (\$1,650) for playing music with explicit lyrics.

In September the NEPLP sent a letter to the European Commission and the media regulator of Sweden, where Russian television channel Rossiya RTR is registered, outlining repeated violations by the channel of the country's media regulations in reports on the crisis in Ukraine that aired in January and July. The NEPLP warned that authorities might suspend the channel's retransmission in the country if it continued to disseminate propaganda regarding the situation in Ukraine. The NEPLP also asserted that the channel broadcast hate speech on several occasions.

According to the State Language Center, municipalities may translate brochures about various topics into other languages, but the translated text must be preceded by a full Latvian version using a font of at least equal size. Municipalities may not distribute materials in a language other than Latvian (for example, by placing them in an individual's private mailbox) unless residents specifically request them (also see section 4).

Libel/Slander Laws: In May the Vidzeme District Court in Riga dismissed a 2012 defamation suit against a public official brought against the leading investigative weekly *IR*. The court also lifted a freeze on *IR*'s assets that another Riga district court imposed even before ruling on the merits of the case. The May ruling held the government official responsible for court expenses of more than 4,000 euros (\$4,400).

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. According to the Latvian Internet Association, 92 percent of residents had access to broadband internet.

Internet speech was subject to the same restrictions as other forms of speech and the press. During the first nine months of the year, Security Police launched one criminal case involving internet postings that allegedly incited national hatred. In October, Security Police initiated criminal proceedings against a leader of the political party For Native Language for articles on his blog that allegedly incited ethnic hatred.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were few government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

In September the State Language Center, a government agency, initiated administrative measures against a museum in Liepaja over the title of an art exhibition that contained a mixture of Cyrillic and Latin letters. Some NGOs, the artist involved, and the museum criticized the center's action, which the museum described as an attempt to restrict how artists should speak. After the museum put a grammatically correct translation beneath the artist's title, the State Language Center closed the case. Some NGOs criticized this as unreasonable punishment for an act of artistic expression.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of assembly. The government generally respected this right, but there were some restrictions. Organizers of demonstrations must notify authorities 10 days in advance. Officials may deny or modify permits to prevent public disorder. Some observers continued to criticize the 10-day notification requirement as a restriction on freedom of assembly.

On March 16, an annual march commemorated Latvians who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. Approximately 1,500 far-right activists, veterans, and their families attended the unofficial march. Observers noted that despite the presence of demonstrators and counterdemonstrators, the procession was peaceful. Prior to the march, the prime minister called on the public to avoid provocations. The Cabinet of Ministers agreed not to participate in the event.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The law prohibits the registration of communist, Nazi, or other organizations that contravene the constitution or advocate the violent overthrow of the government.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights, including with respect to its noncitizen resident population. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system to provide protection to refugees. The system was generally active, accessible, and subject to due process. The law grants asylum seekers the right to receive information from the authorities about asylum procedures in a language in which they are able to communicate. The Latvian Center for Human Rights, an NGO that provided legal services to some asylum seekers, expressed concern that asylum applicants and refugees did not always have prompt access to legal representation.

Asylum seekers could appeal denial of their applications to the courts, and some did so during the year. Persons whose final asylum claims were denied faced return to their countries of transit or origin.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: The country generally did not adjudicate asylum cases based on the applicant's country of origin or country of transit. As an EU member state, the country adheres to the Dublin III Regulation, which permits authorities to return asylum seekers to their country of first entry into the EU if they arrive from other EU member states, except in cases involving family reunification or other humanitarian considerations. There were no credible complaints that authorities ignored exceptional cases or routinely returned asylum seekers to countries with poorly developed asylum systems.

The government did not apply this policy to asylum seekers and migrants to whom it granted provisional admission in accordance with a September EU agreement that redistributed asylum seekers who arrived in the EU during the year among member countries.

Temporary Protection: The law provides for temporary protection of individuals who may not qualify as refugees. No situations requiring such protection arose in the first 10 months of the year.

Stateless Persons

According to UNHCR, there were 262,802 stateless persons in the country in December 2014. As of July the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs listed 257,377 persons as "noncitizen residents," including 176 as stateless persons of Latvian origin, and 40 as stateless persons from

Estonia, Belarus, Lithuania, and Finland. Although UNHCR included most of the country's large noncitizen population in the stateless category, the government preferred to designate them noncitizen residents, as most of them were eligible to naturalize under the law. The government recognized as stateless only those persons with no claim to foreign citizenship or noncitizen resident status. Persons categorized by authorities as stateless may pursue citizenship through naturalization after obtaining a permanent residence permit and lawfully residing in the country for five years. Noncitizen residents accounted for approximately 12 percent of the population.

The law also provides for procedures by which other members of the resident noncitizen population can obtain citizenship. In many cases these include a test of Latvian language skills and the applicant's knowledge of the constitution and the history of the country. The law exempts certain persons from the tests, including persons with disabilities and persons who completed high school with a curriculum taught at least 50 percent in the Latvian language. The law allows dual citizenship in some circumstances.

Noncitizen residents, mostly persons of Slavic origin who moved to the country during the Soviet occupation and their descendants, did not automatically become citizens when the country regained independence in 1991. They have permanent residence status, consular protection abroad, the right to return to the country, and the right to all government social benefits. They also have employment rights, except to some government and private sector positions related to the legal system, law enforcement, and national security. Noncitizens may not vote in local or national elections and may not organize a political party without the participation of at least an equal number of citizens.

The rate of application for citizenship by noncitizen residents remained low. Through October authorities received 945 naturalization applications; they approved 682 applicants and rejected 79, who failed the examination three times or to did not appear for the examination. In a survey conducted by Office of the Citizenship and Migration, 48 percent of noncitizen respondents described their poor language skills as a barrier to passing the naturalization exam. In public surveys of noncitizen residents, the vast majority of respondents indicated they did not undertake the naturalization process and, in addition to language barriers, cited as reasons their political objections to the requirement and their understanding that Latvian citizenship was not necessary for travel to Russia and EU member states.

The ombudsman, NGOs, and the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Racism and Intolerance criticized the government's failure to allow noncitizen residents to participate in local elections or to reduce the number of professions in which noncitizens may not work.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage, and they exercised that right.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: International observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights assessed the October 2014

parliamentary elections for the 100-seat Saeima as free and fair. According to their report, the elections took place in a democratic and pluralistic environment with minimal violations and offered voters a genuine choice.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens may organize political parties without restriction. The law prohibits the country's noncitizen residents from organizing political parties without the participation of at least an equal number of citizens. The election law prohibits persons who remained active in the Communist Party or other pro-Soviet organizations after 1991, or who worked for such institutions as the Soviet KGB, from holding office.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Women participated actively in the political process. Approximately 12 percent of the country's population--36 percent of the ethnic-minority population--were noncitizens who could not participate in elections and had no government representation. Members of ethnic minorities who were citizens, including Russians, Belarusians, Poles, and Ukrainians, participated actively, and the mayor of Riga, the country's largest city, was a member of the ethnic Russian minority. The Harmony Party, which included many ethnic Russians, won the most seats in the October 2014 parliamentary elections. One Saeima member was a naturalized citizen from Lebanon.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. Officials sometimes engaged in corrupt practices, and polling data consistently showed that the public believed that corruption was widespread and that officials often were not held to account. According to a survey released in May, 55 percent of the country's business representatives believed corruption and bribery were widespread.

The Bureau to Prevent and Combat Corruption (KNAB) is the primary body responsible for fighting corruption. Government officials and NGO representatives expressed concern that a continuing public dispute among KNAB's senior officials had a negative impact on the institution's ability to fulfill its mandate.

Corruption: Although NGOs have expressed concern that prosecutions and convictions of state officials were declining, official data did not support this contention. Through December, KNAB recommended 14 criminal cases, involving 26 persons, for prosecution. New cases numbered 27 during the year, compared with 25 in 2014. The courts convicted 21 persons for corruption through December, in comparison with 20 in 2014. In June the Zemgale District Court convicted former judge Ziedonis Strazds of misusing his authority by employing fictitious personnel in his office from 1995 to 2012 to collect their paychecks. The court sentenced him to three years' imprisonment.

In August authorities arrested Ugis Magonis, chief executive officer of the national railroad company "Latvijas Dzelzceļš," on allegations that he accepted a 500,000 euro (\$550,000) bribe. After remaining in jail for two months, Magonis posted bail and remained free pending trial. The case remained under investigation at year's end.

Financial Disclosure: The law requires public officials to file income declarations annually, and authorities investigated irregularities in the declarations. Declarations were public and there were penalties for noncompliance.

In September the Latvian State Revenue Service requested permission from parliament to penalize Minister of Health Guntis Belevics for failing to report a one million euro (\$1.10 million) loan on his official tax return, which was made public as part of his annual income declaration. In October the parliament supported fining him for tax fraud.

KNAB is responsible for overseeing the activities of public officials and implementing conflict-of-interest laws. In the first six months of the year, KNAB fined 56 persons a total of 5,500 euros (\$6,050), and reprimanded a number of others, for conflicts of interest. Most violations involved failure to provide the required income declarations or observe restrictions on outside employment and commercial activities. In 25 cases the declared incomes of public officials or their relatives were found to be inconsistent with their lifestyles, which triggered audits by the State Revenue Service.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for public access to government information, and the government generally provided citizens, noncitizens, and foreign media with the information they requested.

NGOs, including the Latvian Center for Human Rights, criticized attempts by the State Language Center to restrict dissemination of printed information by state institutions in languages other than Latvian, including Russian and English. For example, the State Language Center restricted distribution of Russian-language flyers in hospitals that included medical information for patients. Other restricted documents included Russian-language municipal newspapers and information on public safety, the census, and English-language signs by tourism agencies.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials met with NGOs, often cooperated with them, and responded to their views and inquiries.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Ombudsman's Office has the responsibility to monitor the government's performance on human rights problems. The office received some cooperation from the agencies it monitored and operated without direct government or party interference.

NGOs continued to criticize the Ombudsman's Office for lacking the institutional authority or capacity to investigate and act on allegations of discrimination. They complained that the office frequently put forward problems with little follow-through. As required by law, the office made public an annual report describing its activities and making recommendations to the government.

A Saeima standing committee on human rights and public affairs met weekly during the parliamentary session. It considered initiatives related to human rights, but generally focused more on public media policy.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, and social status. The government enforced most of these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law specifically criminalizes rape but does not recognize spousal rape as a distinct crime. The government enforced the law. Criminal penalties range from probation to life imprisonment, depending on the nature of the crime, the age of the victim, the criminal history of the offender, and the dependence of the victim on the offender. Through September prosecutors brought 52 rape charges. There were 22 victims younger than 16. When police receive a report of rape, they are required to open an investigation.

Domestic violence is an aggravating factor in certain criminal offenses. There are penalties for causing even “minor” bodily harm when the victim and perpetrator are spouses or former spouses. Domestic violence remained a matter of concern; authorities prosecuted a number of cases during the year.

The law allows victims of domestic violence to request police officers to issue restraining orders and requires police and judges to respond to such requests within one business day. The law requires perpetrators to leave the home where the victim lives. It provides a broad definition of violence that includes physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence, and improves protection for vulnerable and abused children by empowering courts to remove them from violent homes if parents or guardians cannot do so or are themselves perpetrators of the violence.

Police issued 59 restraining orders in the first nine months of the year. During the same period, authorities initiated 164 criminal proceedings against alleged perpetrators who violated restraining orders. NGOs complained that in some domestic violence cases, there were problems with the implementation of court orders. In some instances police were unable to locate the subject of the decision. There were occasions when police asked the victims themselves to locate and notify alleged assailants of the restraining orders. In other cases police hesitated to evict alleged perpetrators despite existing restraining orders. According to the NGO Marta, courts rejected two applications for restraining orders during the period.

There was one short-term shelter designated for battered and abused women. Survivors of violence also sought help in family crisis centers, which had limited capacity and gave priority to women with children. While NGOs managed four general crisis hotlines, none was dedicated to rape or assault. The NGO Marta Resource Center for Women operated websites that provided information and legal assistance to female survivors of violence. As of October the center had provided legal assistance and consultations to 142 women.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment is illegal but was reportedly common in the workplace. Victims have the right to submit complaints to the ombudsman and the State Labor Inspectorate. As in 2014 the ombudsman received no complaints regarding sexual harassment, which NGOs blamed on procedures required to register incidents. NGOs reported that police procedures and methods intimidated some women, and some lacked confidence in the ability of law enforcement authorities

to prosecute perpetrators successfully. Cultural factors also discouraged women from filing sexual harassment complaints.

Reproductive Rights: The government recognized the right of couples and individuals to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children; manage their reproductive health; and have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. Only a small number of families received state funding for treatment. As of September 2, 197 families were on a waiting list for reproductive services.

Discrimination: Women enjoy the same legal status and rights as men, including in family, labor, property, nationality, and inheritance law and in the judicial system. The law prohibits employment discrimination. There were reports of discrimination against women in employment and pay (see section 7.d.).

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from one's parents, and only one parent must be a citizen to transmit nationality to a child. Children born in the country to one citizen and one noncitizen parent are citizens at birth.

The law also grants eligibility for automatic citizenship to children born in the country to resident noncitizen parents provided one parent requests citizenship for the child at the time the birth is registered. According to the government, 99 percent of such newborns received automatic citizenship during the year, compared with only 52 percent between July 2011 and October 2013, when new legislation provided for automatic citizenship in such cases. The 2013 legislation also simplified the process by which minor children of noncitizens may claim citizenship. The total number of noncitizen children remained significant. In January there were 7,846 such children, including 6,130 younger than age 15.

Child Abuse: Violence against children was a problem. The law provides definitions of physical and emotional violence against a child. It also specifies minimum qualifications for teachers and other professionals who work with children. Statutory rape is illegal and punishable by four years' imprisonment, or six years if the victim is particularly young. State police can initiate proceedings against a sexual abuser without receiving a complaint if the victim is a minor (younger than age 16). Police effectively enforced laws against child abuse, although NGOs observed that coordination among agencies involved in the protection of children's rights was weak.

During a nationwide, one-week, hotline campaign in October, the State Inspectorate for Children's Rights provided 648 consultations in response to inquiries about cases of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse of children. Approximately 34 of the calls were about the sexual abuse of children, 20 about physical violence, and 44 about emotional violence (the remaining calls involved psychological consultations). During the year the inspectorate investigated 228 cases of alleged violations of children's rights.

As of October, according to the Ministry of Interior, authorities received 59 reports of child sexual abuse and sent 20 of them to prosecutors, who brought them to trial. The courts convicted eight defendants during the first 10 months of the year. The ombudsman received four complaints of violation of children's rights. The Ministry of Welfare, which is responsible for the rehabilitation of

abused children, provided rehabilitation-related services to 1,739 children during the first nine months of the year.

NGOs and other observers criticized light sentences handed down by courts in some child-abuse cases. In July the Liepaja City Court sentenced two men (a father and son) to community service for long-term sexual abuse of a minor. The case stirred controversy throughout the country, as many believed the sentence was too lenient. In October the Kurzeme Regional Court reversed the verdict based on a finding that certain regulations were not followed and returned the case to the Liepaja City Court, where it was pending at year's end. The State Inspectorate for Children's Rights criticized the Liepaja orphanage court for poor representation of the abused minor's interests.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18 years. Persons younger than age 18 may legally marry only with parental permission and if one party is at least 16 and the other is at least 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Child pornography is illegal. The minimum age for consensual sex is 16. The purchase, display, reproduction, or distribution of child pornography is punishable by up to three years in prison. Involving a minor in the production of pornography is punishable by up to 12 years in prison, depending on the age of the child.

A special police unit in Riga worked to prevent the sexual abuse of minors and to eradicate child sex tourism through aggressive prosecution of pedophiles and other child abusers. The unit publicized the potential dangers posed to minors by internet chat rooms and worked closely with local social networking sites to identify potential internet predator cases.

Court proceedings took place during the year against a man arrested in 2013 and charged with raping several underage girls. Authorities also charged him with recording pornographic scenes with underage girls and with grooming approximately 200 underage girls through social networking web sites over a 10-year period. In December the Riga Vidzeme District Court sentenced the man to 17 years in prison.

Institutionalized Children: The ombudsman and several NGOs raised concerns about the continued use of orphanages despite the provision in the law providing that "every child has the inalienable right to grow up in a family." Approximately 1,800 children remained in orphanages, compared with 1,500 in 2014. Nearly 6,200 children lived in foster families and other forms of family environment.

In the first nine months of the year, the State Inspectorate for Children's Rights reported 11 cases of peer-on-peer physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in government-run orphanages and boarding schools for children with special needs. The inspectorate considered that the true figure was much higher, but cases were underreported due to heavy caseloads and limited opportunities for observation.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State's country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/country/latvia.html.

Anti-Semitism

The Central Statistical Bureau Office of Citizenship and Migration reported that there were approximately 8,771 Jewish residents. The Council of Jewish Communities estimated the Jewish population at between 6,200 and 11,000.

There were continued reports of anti-Semitic incidents, including some cases of anti-Semitic statements, but no reports of anti-Semitic attacks against individuals. Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some right-wing fringe elements of society. The government condemned anti-Semitism and responded to anti-Semitic incidents.

In October a World War II-era hand grenade was found near the Chabad Jewish private school in Riga. According to police there was no evidence to suggest that the grenade was aimed at the Jewish school or its property. Police were investigating the incident.

Jewish community representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. On November 29, President Raimonds Vejonis, Saeima Speaker Inara Murniece, and Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics spoke at a ceremony in commemorating the 25,000 mainly Latvian and German Jews who were killed there by Nazi German forces in November-December 1941. President Vejonis highlighted the need to acknowledge the role of local collaborators and take steps to restitute Jewish community properties.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services, and the government generally enforced these provisions. The law mandates access to air travel and other transportation for persons with disabilities, and the government and municipalities partially implemented the law.

Although the law mandates access to public buildings for persons with disabilities, most were not accessible. The NGO Apeirons reported that approximately 80 percent of new and renovated buildings throughout the country were not accessible to persons with disabilities, and only 2 percent of all buildings were fully accessible.

In October the government allocated 3.7 million euros (\$4.1 million) to expand personal assistance services to persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Welfare required the release of most individuals with mental disabilities from state institutions by 2017. NGOs have complained that the government allocated insufficient resources to the transition.

The law grants additional assistance to children with disabilities, allowing them and their caretakers to use public transportation free of charge. The law also permits families of children with a disability to receive state-funded counseling. Children with disabilities attended school. The

majority attended specialized schools, but they could also attend regular schools that accommodated their needs. The government provided eligible children with disabilities with assistants in schools.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The law prohibits discrimination based on race. NGOs representing minority groups claimed that discrimination and harassment of national minorities was underreported to authorities. Through June the ombudsman received two written complaints of racial or ethnic discrimination, compared with five in 2014.

In the first seven months of the year, police initiated six criminal cases alleging incitement of ethnic or racial hatred. Complaints generally involved hate speech on the internet.

In June media reported that two foreign students experienced discrimination, including bullying on the street and fraud in renting apartments. The students complained that police did not take their complaints seriously. The Ombudsman's Office and the NGO Center for Human Rights reported receiving several complaints from foreign students about discrimination.

The Romani community continued to face widespread societal discrimination and high levels of unemployment and illiteracy. According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration, there were approximately 7,800 Roma in the country. Observers continued to criticize the government's action plan to address unemployment and educational problems in the Romani community, claiming the plan was underfunded and insufficient to bring about substantial improvements in conditions for Roma.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The country's antidiscrimination laws do not prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. NGOs expressed concerns about the lack of explicit protection in criminal law against incitement to hatred and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In October the Riga City Council ordered the removal of public posters promoting tolerance of LGBTI lifestyles, citing the need to protect the public from "undesirable language and thoughts."

The ombudsman reported receiving no reports of alleged discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, but LGBTI representatives reported that cooperation between the ombudsman and the LGBTI community was limited. NGOs complained that intolerance of LGBTI persons was widespread and that attacks and discrimination against them were underreported.

The NGO Mozaika received 16 reports of violence against LGBTI individuals in the first 10 months of the year. Eight of the incidents were physical attacks; others ranged from verbal attacks to discrimination at work and bullying in schools.

Riga hosted EuroPride 2015, with more than 5,000 persons participating in a parade through the city. The event took place without incident, a marked improvement over past, smaller-scale events,

which were met with harassment and violence. Mozaika reported that authorities were cooperative and professional.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and employer interference in union functions, and it provides reinstatement for unlawful dismissal, including dismissal for union activity.

Several limitations on these rights remained. Uniformed members of the military may not form or join unions. While the law provides for the right to strike, it prohibits strikes in sectors related to public safety and by personnel classified as essential, including judges, prosecutors, police, firefighters, border guards, employees of state security institutions, prison guards, and military personnel. The law prohibits “solidarity” strikes by workers who are not directly involved in a specific labor agreement between strikers and their employers, a restriction criticized by local labor groups. The law provides arbitration mechanisms for essential personnel not permitted to strike.

The government generally enforced applicable labor laws. Resources, inspections, and remediation were adequate. Penalties for violation ranged from a few hundred to several thousand euros but were insufficient to deter violations. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals. Labor-rights organizations expressed concern about employer discrimination against union members.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were generally respected. Worker organizations were sometimes independent of the government or political parties, employers, or employers’ associations.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. There were no reports of forced labor during the year. The government effectively enforced the law. The Ministry of Welfare’s State Labor Inspectorate, the agency responsible for enforcing labor laws, conducted regular inspections of workplaces and reported no incidents of forced labor. Resources were not completely adequate to sustain long-term investigations into forced labor. The government sponsored NGOs that performed educational outreach throughout the country to raise awareness about forced labor. Penalties ranged from fines to 15 years’ imprisonment and were sufficiently stringent compared with similar serious crimes.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The statutory minimum age for employment is 15. Children who are age 13 or older may work in certain jobs outside of school hours with written permission from a parent. The law prohibits children younger than age 18 from performing nighttime or overtime work. Inspectors from the State Labor Inspectorate are responsible for enforcing child labor laws and did so effectively. There were no reports of labor abuses involving children. The inspectorate's resources and inspections were adequate. Penalties for violations are monetary and range significantly, depending on the severity and frequency of the violation. They were generally sufficient to deter violations.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination regarding race, sex, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation or gender identity, HIV-positive status or other communicable diseases, or social status. The government effectively enforced these laws and regulations. Fines for violations may range up to 700 euros (\$770).

The law requires employers to provide equal pay for equal work. Government regulatory agencies did not fully implement the law. According to the March Eurobarometer survey on gender equality, the average salary of female workers was 15 percent lower than that of their male counterparts. There were instances of hiring and pay discrimination against women, particularly in the private sector. During the first 10 months of the year, the ombudsman initiated one case of employment discrimination against a woman, allegedly because she was pregnant.

Discrimination in employment and occupation also occurred with respect to sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

In January the government increased the monthly minimum wage to 360 euros (\$396).

The law provides for a maximum workweek of 40 hours with at least one 42-hour rest period weekly. The maximum permitted overtime is 144 hours in a four-month period. Employees may not work more than 24 hours consecutively, 56 hours in a week, or overtime on more than six consecutive days. The law requires a minimum of 100 percent premium pay in compensation for overtime, unless the parties agree to other forms of compensation in a contract. The law entitles workers to 28 calendar days of paid annual vacation.

The law establishes minimum occupational health and safety standards for the workplace. While the law allows workers to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, these regulations were not always followed.

Investigation continued into the causes of the collapse of the Maxima supermarket in 2013 that killed 54 persons, as well as into observance of work-safety standards at the retail store. In October the Prosecutor's Office brought criminal charges against nine people involved in the construction and supervision of building's construction.

Through June the inspectorate reported 43 workplace fatalities, most of which were classified as due to natural causes, and 67 serious workplace injuries. The total number of workplace accidents

was 581, an increase compared with the previous year. The State Labor Inspectorate commented that most of the injuries were not severe, and that employees were more active in reporting accidents. The majority of workplace injuries and fatalities were in the construction, wood-processing, and lumber industries.

The State Labor Inspectorate is responsible for enforcing minimum-wage regulations, restrictions on hours of work, and occupational health and safety standards. The inspectorate had adequate resources to inspect and remediate labor standards problems. There were 109 labor inspectors. Penalties for violations are monetary and may range significantly depending on the severity and frequency of the violation, but they were generally sufficient to deter violations.

According to the *2012 Labor Force Survey*, the most recent such data available, 34.1 percent of employees reported receiving a net monthly wage that was lower than the legal minimum. The true number of working poor was difficult to calculate due to the sizeable informal economy, which, according to some estimates, accounted for up to 39 percent of the gross domestic product. Workers in low-skilled manufacturing and retail jobs, as well as some public sector employees, such as firefighters, were reportedly most vulnerable to poor working conditions, including long work hours, lack of overtime pay, and arbitrary remuneration.